

Help Seeking Behaviors in Individuals Experiencing Romantic Partner Conflicts

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Abstract

Individuals experiencing high levels of conflict in their romantic relationships often wrestle with the decision to seek help. This mixed-methods study investigated help-seeking behaviors, and potential barriers to seeking or continuing support. Using the Romantic Partner Conflict Scale (RPCS) and in-depth interviews with individuals experiencing high relationship conflict, we explored the prevalence of help-seeking and its correlation with RPCS scores. Factors influencing help-seeking behavior, such as stigma, access to resources, and personal resistance, were identified. Additionally, reasons for discontinuing help-seeking, including dissatisfaction with services, emotional challenges, and logistical difficulties, were examined. The study reveals the intricate array of individual experiences within high-conflict relationships. While some individuals engage in help-seeking, others navigate internal and external barriers, highlighting the need for targeted interventions and destigmatized support systems. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of help-seeking patterns in high-conflict relationships, informing efforts to improve access to effective support and empower individuals to seek help when needed.

Keywords: relationship conflict, help-seeking behavior, romantic relationships, Romantic Partner Conflict Scale (RPCS), barriers to help-seeking, mixed-methods research.

Introduction

A study by Heginbotham defines active seeking of help as seeking help from any source, both formal and informal. Understanding these behaviors can help reduce barriers to treatment. Mental health is a societal concern, impacting our ability to handle change and navigate life events. It can be conceptualized as a continuum, with individuals at different points based on life events, genetic inheritance, and developmental phases. Promoting appropriate help-seeking behaviors is essential for reducing barriers to treatment (Heginbotham, 2005).

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), developed by Azjen in 1985, asserts that an individual's decision to engage in a particular behavior is influenced by their intentions. Intentions capture motivating factors and predict the effort required to carry out the action. Stronger intentions are more likely to occur. Research indicates that help-seeking intentions are more closely related to actual behavior than other constructs. The General Help Seeking Questionnaire (GHSQ) measures help-seeking intentions.

Conflict is a central focus in many theories, as it disrupts ongoing behavior and communication. Social exchange theory, systems theory, and explicit behavioral theories focus on poor communication as the cause of conflict. Three typologies of conflict resolution strategies are discussed: integrative, distributive, and avoidant. In an article by Peterson (1983) he describes five strategies: separation, domination,

compromise, integrative agreement, and structural improvement. Lulofs and Cahn (2000) propose five strategies: avoidance, accommodation, competition, compromise, and collaboration. These strategies typically involve one or more tactics and vary in the number and names of conflict strategies proposed. The three-way taxonomy illustrates that classification schemes have developed instead of explicit theory in relational conflict studies, describing several strategies and tactics.

Relationship conflict, arising from differences in values, communication styles, and external stressors, can be distressing and detrimental to individuals' well-being and satisfaction. High levels of conflict can make it difficult for individuals to seek support, and understanding the dynamics and barriers to help-seeking behaviors is crucial. Identifying factors influencing these behaviors can inform targeted interventions, reduce stigma, and enhance understanding of navigating conflict across diverse populations.

The following hypothesis and objectives are proposed for the study.

Hypothesis:

H1 - Individuals with higher scores on the RPCS will exhibit greater scores on the General Help Seeking Questionnaire.

H2 - There will be a positive correlation between RPCS scores and scores on the General Help Seeking Questionnaire.

Objectives:

1. Identify the prevalence of help-seeking behaviours in individuals with high scores on the Romantic Partner Conflict Scale (RPCS).
2. Explore the correlations between RPCS scores and scores of the General Help Seeking Behavior Scale.
3. Investigate the factors influencing help-seeking behaviour in individuals with high relationship conflict.

Review of Literature

Emerging adulthood, spanning from 18 to 25 years, is a critical period for developing supportive and emotionally close romantic relationships. During this phase, individuals form cognitive beliefs about conflict's role in relationships and develop conflict management strategies that shape their future long-term partnerships and individual health. It was important to understand the dynamics as the capacity of young partners to reflect on their own and their partner's needs is understudied (Feiring, Markus & Simon, 2020). However, research involving 200 participants suggests that partner conflict tends to increase between ages 19 and 25 before slightly declining, with various factors such as parental divorce, low socioeconomic status, being the only child, relationship status, having biological offsprings, cohabiting were influencing conflict patterns, Different patterns were articulated among men and women (Chen et al., 2006).

In the United States, the landscape of romantic coupling is evolving, with changes observed in communication patterns. A study of 1,013 couples found that communication emerges as the most common conflict topic among couples, followed by parenting, personal habits, finances, decision-making, and time management. The study also found that financial issues negatively impact relationship satisfaction, while effective time management positively contributes to it (Meyer & Sledge, 2022). The study analyzed two studies to predict individuals' likelihood of seeking help. Results showed that distress is more likely when individuals have positive attitudes towards counseling, and when social support

networks are impaired. Self-concealment is more important in intensifying psychological difficulties than providing relief (Cramer, 1999).

Couples facing conflict often turn to couples counseling to address their concerns. However, there are gender differences in help-seeking behaviors, with female partners often suggesting seeking help initially, while male partners may feel a sense of failure and fear judgment. Patterns of blame, withdrawal, and aggression contribute to increased distress, prompting some couples to seek counseling (Parnell et. al., 2018). In African American communities, religion/spirituality and family emerge as significant resources for help-seeking in marital problems. Despite strong marriages, willingness to seek professional help is not significantly different, as participants primarily rely on trustworthiness and maintain privacy within their relationships (Vaterlaus et. al., 2015). Among youths experiencing dating violence, motives for seeking support include advice, emotional expression, external perspective, comfort, and validation. However, reluctance to seek help stems from discomfort, lack of support, and fear of judgment. Peers play a crucial role in offering support and intervening in dating violence situations (Fernet et. al., 2021). In a study conducted on 1,856 military couples it was found that knowledge and prior use of services, years of formal education, and willingness to consult parents and other relatives significantly predicted the potential use of counseling services by both spouses (Bowen & Richman, 1991).

Men often underutilize mental health services due to gender role conflict, leading to increased stigmatization and decreased willingness to refer friends and family members experiencing mental health concerns (Vogel et. al., 2014). Many individuals with psychological distress and mental illness do not seek treatment through formal channels, with only 15.3% receiving treatment in the past year according to the survey conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO). This reluctance contributes to the issue of formal help-seeking, with only a small percentage of individuals with psychological distress seeking treatment through formal channels (Andrews, Issakidis & Carter 2001).

Overall, the literature highlights the complexities of conflict experiences and help-seeking behaviors in romantic relationships, influenced by individual, cultural, and societal factors. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing effective interventions and support strategies tailored to the diverse needs of individuals and couples navigating relationship challenges. Future studies should consider a more holistic approach to understanding relationship dynamics and help-seeking behaviors, taking into account individual, relational, and contextual factors.

Rationale

Despite the extensive literature on relationship conflict and help-seeking behaviors, there remains a notable gap in understanding the specific dynamics and barriers to seeking support among individuals experiencing high levels of conflict in romantic relationships. Existing studies often focus on general help-seeking behaviors or specific relationship issues without adequately addressing the complex interplay between conflict intensity, help-seeking tendencies, and potential barriers to seeking or continuing support. Furthermore, while some research suggests a relationship between relationship conflict and help-seeking behaviors, the nature and extent of this association remain underexplored. Therefore, there is a pressing need for comprehensive research that delves deeper into the prevalence of help-seeking behaviors among individuals with high scores on measures of relationship conflict, such as the Romantic Partner Conflict Scale (RPCS). By investigating the correlations between RPCS scores and scores on the General Help Seeking Questionnaire, this study aims to provide valuable insights into the factors influencing help-seeking behavior in this population. Such insights can inform the development of targeted interventions

and support strategies tailored to the unique needs of individuals experiencing significant conflict in their romantic relationships, ultimately contributing to improved relationship outcomes and overall well-being. A notable gap identified within the literature on romantic partner conflict or distress is the disproportionate focus on domestic violence and abuse, while other factors contributing to conflicts have received less attention. There is a clear need for future research to explore a wider range of conflicts experienced within romantic relationships. Common areas of conflict, such as communication issues, financial problems, intimacy issues, trust and infidelity, family and social dynamics, and personal habits and behaviors, warrant further investigation. A more holistic approach to understanding romantic partner conflicts is essential to provide comprehensive insights into the dynamics of these relationships.

Method

Design

The research philosophy that will be used for this study will be Interpretivism. An interpretive stance will help to understand the subjective experiences and meanings attached to conflict and help-seeking in romantic relationships. Interpretivism is a research philosophy that focuses on understanding social phenomena from the perspective of individuals and their subjective experiences. It emphasizes the importance of context, meanings, and social interactions. The study aims to explore the lived experiences, perceptions, and subjective interpretations of individuals regarding conflict and help-seeking in romantic relationships hence an interpretivist research philosophy may be more suitable.

This study is a mixed method design. The methodology applied is a sequential explanatory mixed- method design comprising both quantitative and qualitative components. This study will be divided into two phases, Phase 1 involving quantitative research method and Phase 2 involving qualitative research method. In the initial phase quantitative data will be collected from the participants and then later analyzed. The participants will have to fill two questionnaires through an online platform, assessing romantic partner conflict and help seeking behavior.

In the next phase, qualitative data will be collected through in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews are justified for the research problem because they provide rich qualitative data, offer flexibility in exploration, prioritize the participant's perspective, uncover contextual factors, and are suitable for a small sample size. Their adaptability promotes trust, allowing participants to be completely honest, and qualitative analysis provides deep insights into the dynamics of help seeking behaviors related to requesting support.

Sample:

Phase 1:

A sample of 100-120 participants is required for the quantitative data analysis.

Phase 2:

From the results of the qualitative survey, 10-15 participants who have scored high on the Romantic Partner Conflict Scale, will be selected for the in-depth interviews.

Sampling Technique:

The sampling technique used for the quantitative analysis will be purposive sampling. Purposive sampling allows researchers to deliberately select participants who have experienced such conflicts, ensuring the sample's representativeness to the research question. Additionally, given the complexity of romantic

relationship dynamics, purposive sampling enables researchers to include a diverse range of participants in terms of age, gender, cultural background, and relationship status, enriching the data with varied perspectives.

During Phase 1, the sampling technique will help us gather participants with romantic partner conflicts. This same method will be continued in Phase 2 to filter out and refine our sample pool, by purposefully selecting participants who scored higher romantic partner conflict.

Inclusion Criteria:

The inclusion criteria includes the following:

1. Participants must provide their informed consent before being a part of the study.
2. The participants should be aged 18 and above, but below the age of 30.
3. The participants should currently be in a committed romantic relationship for at least one year.

Exclusion criteria:

The exclusion criteria consists of the following:

1. The survey questionnaire and the interview will be conducted in English Language, hence the participants must be fluent in the language and should be able to comprehend the information effectively and give appropriate responses.
2. The participant's capacity to understand and react appropriately may be impacted by a specific cognitive impairment.
3. People who are married.

Tools Used:

Phase 1:

1. Romantic Partner Conflict Scale (RPCS) - The scale is a self-report measure that assesses the frequency and intensity of conflict in romantic relationships. The scale was introduced by Tammy L. Zaccilli. The scales consist of 39 items with six subscales, they are Compromise, Avoidance, Interactional Reactivity, Separation, Dominance and Submission. The scales' test-retest correlations were as follows: Submission (.72), Separation (.76), Domination (.85), Avoidance (.70), Compromise (.82), and Interactional Reactivity (.85)
2. General Help-Seeking Questionnaire (GHSQ)- The GHSQ, developed by Wilson et al.,(2005) measures help-seeking intentions for personal or emotional problems. Participants rate their likelihood of seeking help from various options, such as friends, mental health professionals, religious leaders, parents, support lines, or doctors. A score of 10 to 70 indicates a greater intention to seek help. The GHSQ has internal consistency (Chronbach's Alpha=0.70) and test-retest reliability ($r = .86$)

Phase 2:

1. In-depth interview Guide- An in-depth interview guide is a valuable tool for qualitative research in mixed-method designs. It offers structured exploration, consistency, standardization, flexibility for probing, alignment with quantitative data, and maintains participant engagement. It ensures the qualitative data adds depth and context to the study, enhancing its validity and comprehensiveness.

Operational Definitions of Variables:

This study consists of two measurable variables which include:

Romantic Partner Conflict:

This study defines romantic partner conflict as disagreements, arguments, or tensions between individuals in a romantic relationship, ranging from minor disagreements to significant disputes that cause emotional distress or strain, affecting communication, finances, intimacy, and lifestyle preferences. This variable is measured using the Romantic Partner Conflict Scale.

Help- Seeking Behaviour:

In romantic relationships, help-seeking behaviour involves intentional actions to seek support, guidance, or assistance in managing or resolving conflicts. Strategies include seeking advice, consulting therapists, using self-help resources, and collaborating on communication techniques. This variable is measured using the General Help Seeking Behaviour Scale.

Individuals:

This can include individuals of a minimum age of 18 years and above, coming from any educational background and who have been in a romantic relational relationship for more than a year.

Procedure:

After obtaining informed consent from participants, they will be asked to complete a set of self-report questionnaires online or through pen and pencil format. The questionnaires will be measuring relationship conflict (Romantic Partner Conflict Scale.), help-seeking behaviours (General Help Seeking Questionnaire), and demographic information. Correlational and Regression analysis will be conducted on the scores on the RCPS and the GHSQ. Follow-up in-depth interviews will be conducted with participants that exceed a designated threshold on the Romantic Partner Conflict Scale.

Ethical Considerations:

This study will adhere to ethical guidelines outlined by institutional review boards and relevant professional organizations. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants, and their confidentiality and privacy will be protected throughout the research process. Participants will be informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. Debriefing session will be offered to the participants. Cultural sensitivity would be maintained and the process would be monitored and reviewed timely.

Data Collection:

Phase 1: The quantitative data will be collected by circulating the questionnaire on an online platform, by circulating Google Forms. A link will be created and the convenience of the participant will be taken into account.

Phase 2: The qualitative phase will involve in-depth interviews from 10-15 consented participants. The data will be collected from personal interaction, due to geographical barriers, the interviews will be conducted using online platforms such as Google Meet, Skype or Zoom.

Data Analysis:

Phase 1: Quantitative data will be analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlational analysis (Pearson Correlation) and regression analysis to explore the relationships between scores on the RPCS and GHSQ.

Statistical software JAMOVI will be utilized for the data analysis and appropriate statistical tests will be utilized.

Phase 2: Qualitative data from the in-depth interviews will be analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes and patterns. Braun and Clarke (2006) 6-stage model of thematic analysis will be followed for the same.

Results

Phase 1-Quantitative Analysis

Table 1 Pearson Correlation for Matrix for Romantic Partner Conflict and Help Seeking Behavior

| Sr. No | Variables | 1 | 2 |
|--------|-----------------------|-------|---|
| 1 | Conflict Scores | 1 | – |
| 2 | Help-Seeking Behavior | 0.151 | 1 |

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

A Pearson correlation was conducted to assess the relationship between conflict and help-seeking behaviors. The results indicated that there was a very weak positive correlation between conflict and help-seeking behaviors, ($r(192) = .10$), ($p = .15$). This correlation was not statistically significant.

Interpretation:

The above given table examines the correlation between RPCS scores and the scores on the General Help Seeking Questionnaire. The hypothesis states that, there will be a strong positive correlation between RPCS scores and scores on the General Help Seeking Questionnaire.

The Pearson's r value of 0.103 indicates a positive but very weak correlation between Conflict and Help-seeking. However, the p -value of 0.151 suggests that this correlation is not statistically significant, as it exceeds the common threshold of 0.05. With a degrees of freedom (df) of 192, the results indicate that although there is a slight tendency for higher Conflict scores to be associated with higher Help-seeking score. This suggests that help-seeking behavior is influenced not solely by the intensity of conflicts, but by a range of other factors. Consequently, the results do not align with the initial hypothesis.

Discussion

The current study aimed to investigate the relationship between Relationship Patterns Conflict Scale (RPCS) scores and scores on the General Help Seeking Questionnaire (GHSQ). The hypothesis proposed that there would be a positive correlation between RPCS scores, indicating higher levels of relational conflict, and GHSQ scores, suggesting a greater likelihood of seeking help. Contrary to our hypothesis, the results of the correlation analysis did not reveal a significant positive correlation between RPCS scores and GHSQ scores.

Help-seeking is a multifaceted behavior influenced by various factors beyond the presence of relational conflict. Personal attitudes toward seeking help, stigma associated with help-seeking, and availability of social support could play crucial roles in determining whether individuals seek help, potentially overshadowing the impact of relational conflict.

Cultural norms and societal expectations surrounding help-seeking can significantly influence individuals'

willingness to seek help. In contexts where seeking help is stigmatized or viewed as a sign of weakness, individuals may be less likely to seek help, regardless of the level of conflict they experience. These cultural factors were not controlled for in this study, which could explain the weak correlation observed. During the interviews, some interviewees recorded the stigmas associated with men seeking help. Society thinks that people who seek help are “crazy” and are mocked at by their peers and have a fear that they will let down their family with their decision to seek help and also how they perceive them differently and may also feel that seeking help is a sign of weakness or failure on their part.

Many individuals experience discomfort when it comes to sharing personal issues with professionals, such as counselors or therapists, due to concerns surrounding privacy and confidentiality. This apprehension can serve as a significant barrier to seeking professional help, even in situations where conflict levels are elevated. Another interviewee expressed doubts about the effectiveness of seeking help, feeling uncomfortable discussing their issues with a stranger who only hears one side of the story. Some individuals may feel that a therapist who is unfamiliar with their personal background may be unable to fully understand their unique experiences and perspectives. As one interviewee expressed, a "toxic sense of independence" often prevents her from seeking help, leading her to consider professional assistance only as a last resort, when she feels she is in desperate need. There is also a concern that seeking help might change how the relationship is perceived, both by the partners themselves and by others. Couples might worry that going to therapy will make them see their relationship as more problematic than it actually is, or that others will view their relationship as troubled.

Partner's unwillingness to seek help also plays a major role. If one partner is unwilling or reluctant to seek help, the other may also avoid doing so, even if the conflict is significant. This can be influenced by the stigma attached to mental health support or a lack of understanding of its benefits.

One of the most significant emotional barriers is the fear of reopening past insecurities. For example, one interviewee expressed concerns about the potential negative impact on their current relationship if they were to revisit past relationship issues. This fear stems from the possibility that discussing past insecurities could lead to new trust issues or reawaken old emotional pain that had been previously suppressed or managed. Engaging in therapy or counseling requires a level of vulnerability that some individuals may not be comfortable with. The idea of discussing intimate and potentially painful details of their relationship with a stranger can be daunting. This discomfort is often tied to trust—entrusting a therapist with sensitive information might feel risky, especially if there is a fear that the therapist might not fully understand the context or the couple's unique dynamic.

Another barrier is skepticism regarding the effectiveness of professional help. One interviewee specifically mentioned discomfort with the idea of talking to someone who only hears one side of the story. This indicates a concern that therapy might be biased or that the counselor might not provide valuable insights without a complete understanding of both partners' perspectives. This skepticism can stem from past experiences with therapy that were not beneficial or from a general mistrust of the process. The structure of therapy, which often involves delving into personal and relational issues, might not appeal to everyone. Some individuals might prefer to resolve conflicts on their own rather than expose their relationship to external analysis. This concern can be heightened if there is a belief that therapy will only complicate the situation rather than provide clear solutions.

Financial constraints can also be a major reason why people could be reluctant to take up therapy. One interviewee shared their struggle with the cost of therapy, which forced them to seek out more affordable options. This situation is exacerbated when there is also a lack of support from family members, as in the

case where the interviewee’s parents held stigmatizing views about therapy. The cost of professional help can be prohibitive, especially if insurance does not cover it, leading some couples to forgo therapy altogether. Even when couples are willing to seek help, finding affordable and accessible services can be challenging. Limited access to low-cost or subsidized counseling services means that some couples may not have viable options for professional support. This financial barrier is particularly acute for younger couples or those in lower-income brackets, who might prioritize other financial obligations over therapy. Another important factor, apart from personal therapy, even couples don’t feel comfortable seeking help together as a couple. Unmarried couples might fear judgment from society or their communities for seeking therapy. As one participant acknowledged in the, there is an underlying societal stigma around therapy that could be even more pronounced for couples who aren't married. The fear of being judged for needing help in a non-marital relationship can deter them from seeking therapy together. Unmarried couples might worry that their relationship will not be taken as seriously by a therapist or by others. There is a concern that therapists or society may view their relationship as less legitimate or less worthy of professional intervention compared to married couples. This could lead to reluctance in seeking help together, as they may feel their issues will not be given the same weight. An interviewee stated that, being young adults, their relationship issues seems so minute as compared to the future responsibilities coming their way, if they have to seek help for their relationships at this stage, where the real life problems have not even started, they might as well end their relationship the relationship is already a failure.

Phase 2- Qualitative Analysis

Table 2 Thematic Analysis

| Global Themes | Organizational Themes | Basic Themes | |
|--|--|--|---|
| 1. Interpersonal Conflict Dynamics | Ambiguity and Disconnection Between Partners | Lack of Quality Time | |
| | | Doubt and Confusion about their choice of Partner | |
| | Emotional Impact of Relationship Struggles | Emotional Strain | |
| | | Doubt and Confusion about their choice of Partner | |
| | | | Unresolved Conflict |
| | | | Emotional Turmoil |
| | | | Feeling dejected and unsupported |
| | | Understanding the Dual Nature of Conflicts | Acceptance Through Conflict |
| | | | Conflict makes a Relationship Stronger, |
| | | | Understanding Conflict as Inevitable |
| | | Prolonged Conflict has a Negative Impact on the Relationship | |
| 2. Factors Influencing Help Seeking Behavior | Fear of Vulnerability and Emotional Openness | Fear of Vulnerability | |
| | | Fear of Unraveling Past Conflicts | |

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| | | Reluctance to Talk about Feelings |
| | | Feeling Unsupported |
| | | Will consider self as a Failure |
| | | Fear of Disappointing the Therapist |
| | | Emotional Clutter |
| | Distrust of External Support | Distrust of External Support |
| | | feeling overlooked by the therapist who is perceived as a stranger |
| | | Preference for Familiarity |
| | Partner's Reluctance to Seek Help | Partner Being a Private Person |
| | | Limited Communication and Emotional Expression of the Partner |
| | | Partner's Resistance to Professional Help |
| | Fear of Loss of Control and Identity | Wanting to be Independent |
| | | Change in Perception of Self |
| | | Struggle with Self-Reliance |
| | | Loss of Control over Their Life |
| | Financial Barriers | Valuing Therapy Over Cost |
| | | Concerns about Spending on Therapy |
| | Unwanted Advices creates confusion and Pressure | Confusion from Advice |
| | | Fear of Disappointing the Therapist |
| | Limited Access for Unmarried Couples | Lack of Awareness of Available Services |
| | | Limited Access for Unmarried Partners |
| 3.Role of Support System and Personal Coping Strategies | Conflicting Role of Friends in Conflict Resolution | Friends as Problem-Solvers |
| | | Mismatch in Expectations of the Friends |
| | | Friend's Frustration |
| | | Friends Acting as a Good Distraction |
| | Personal Coping Strategies | Disconnecting and Relaxation |
| | | Seeking Solitude |
| | Family Expectations and Peer Influence | Fear of Disappointing Family |
| | | Lack of Understanding from Family |
| | | Peer Influence |

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| | Cultural and Social Stigma | Only Mentally Unstable People Seek Help |
| | | Men should not Seek Help |
| | | Conventional Mindset |
| | | Problems staying Within the Family |
| | | Lack of Parental Support |
| | Social Pressures and Fear of Peer Judgement | Fear of Judgement and Hesitation to Open-up |
| | | Fear of Getting Teased by Friends |
| 4. Expectations from Professional Helpers | Expectations from the Therapist | Therapist Support and safe environment |
| | | Confidentiality and Trust |
| | | Expert Guidance and Advice |
| | | Empathy and Non- Judgementality |
| | | Recognition of Early Relationship Challenges |
| | Understand the relationship conflicts in Unmarried Couples | Recognition of Early Relationship Challenges |
| | | Perception of Young Adult's Issues |
| | | Introducing Therapy in Early Relationships |
| | Promoting understanding between partners | Understanding Partner's Expectations |
| | | Effective Communication between Partners |
| | Normalizing Help-seeking | Promotion of Personal Therapy |
| | | Personal Growth and Relationship Improvement |
| | | Need for Couple Friendly Spaces |

Discussion

The thematic analysis of how individuals experiencing high conflict in romantic relationships navigate and seek support revealed four central themes: Interpersonal Conflict Dynamics, Factors Influencing Help-Seeking Behavior, Role of Support Systems and Personal Coping Strategies, and Expectations from Professional Helpers. These themes collectively uncover the complex emotional, psychological, and social challenges that individuals face in such relationships, as well as the barriers that hinder them from seeking professional help.

The first global theme, Interpersonal Conflict Dynamics, highlights the nature and progression of relationship conflicts, emphasizing how emotional disconnect and ambiguity between partners often exacerbate existing tensions. Many individuals reported experiencing a lack of quality time, being too focused on work, and feeling neglected, all of which contributed to emotional distance. This disconnection led to feelings of confusion and doubt about the future of the relationship, with individuals questioning

whether they were a good match for their partner. Some participants felt strung along or feared that their relationship was on the verge of collapsing. Emotional strain was a recurring theme, with individuals describing the overwhelming and stressful nature of ongoing conflicts, which often made them feel suffocated, angry, or emotionally drained. Despite this, a dual perspective on conflict emerged: while unresolved conflicts were perceived as damaging, some participants acknowledged that disagreements are a normal part of relationships and, when managed well, can strengthen the bond. However, prolonged and unresolved conflict often led individuals to believe that their relationship might not survive, reflecting the fragile nature of romantic connections under strain.

The second global theme, Factors Influencing Help-Seeking Behavior, delves into the barriers that prevent individuals from seeking external support. One of the most significant factors was the fear of vulnerability and emotional openness. Many participants were hesitant to share their feelings, fearing that opening up could hurt more than it could help. The idea of exposing their insecurities to a therapist or discussing unresolved past conflicts often felt too risky. This reluctance to be vulnerable also extended to their romantic partners, with many expressing that discussing their feelings made them feel weak or that their partner did not understand the emotional impact of the conflict. Another major barrier was distrust of external support, particularly therapists. Participants expressed discomfort in sharing personal issues with strangers, fearing judgment or misunderstanding. Some individuals preferred to keep their issues private, relying on familiar people rather than seeking professional help. Additionally, many noted their partner's resistance to seeking help, explaining that their partner was often too private or uncomfortable with the idea of involving a professional in their relationship issues. Finally, the fear of losing control over their identity and situation emerged as a significant concern, with individuals expressing a desire to handle their problems independently. They feared that therapy would shift control of their lives to someone else, making them feel powerless or dependent.

The third global theme, Role of Support Systems and Personal Coping Strategies, explores the influence of social networks and personal coping mechanisms on conflict resolution. Friends often played a conflicting role in resolving relationship issues. On the one hand, supportive friends provided emotional encouragement and practical advice, helping individuals gain new perspectives on their conflicts. However, when friends failed to meet their expectations or grew frustrated with the ongoing issues, the relationship with friends could become a source of additional stress. Some individuals also felt that mutual friends, shared with their partner, complicated matters further. On a more personal level, individuals employed various coping strategies to manage relationship stress, such as seeking solitude or engaging in relaxing activities like taking walks or turning off their phones. Disconnecting from their partner temporarily often provided a way to cool off and regain emotional clarity. Family expectations also played a role, with some participants expressing a fear of disappointing their families by seeking therapy, as they believed their parents would not understand or support the decision. Cultural stigmas surrounding mental health further complicated the help-seeking process, particularly for men, who were often expected to appear strong and self-reliant rather than vulnerable. This societal pressure created additional barriers to seeking professional support.

The final global theme, Expectations from Professional Helpers, examines what individuals look for in therapists and the therapeutic process. Many participants expressed a desire for therapists to create a safe and comforting environment where they could feel secure and understood. Empathy, non-judgmentality, and confidentiality were essential qualities that individuals sought in a therapist, as they wanted to feel that their issues would be handled with care and discretion. There was also a strong emphasis on therapists

recognizing the unique challenges faced by unmarried or young couples. Some participants noted that therapy is often perceived as only for married couples, leaving young adults feeling unsupported in their relationship struggles. They expressed the need for therapists to acknowledge that young couples, too, face significant issues that deserve attention and guidance. Finally, participants highlighted the importance of normalizing therapy and promoting personal and relational growth. Many believed that seeking help should be encouraged early in relationships, as it could foster personal development and strengthen the bond between partners. They called for couple-friendly spaces where partners could feel comfortable seeking help together, reinforcing the idea that therapy should be an accessible and positive experience for all individuals, regardless of their relationship status.

In conclusion, this thematic analysis underscores the complexities of navigating high-conflict romantic relationships and the multifaceted barriers individuals face when considering help-seeking. Emotional vulnerability, distrust of external support, social pressures, and cultural stigmas all contribute to the hesitation individuals feel toward seeking professional help. Addressing these barriers through empathetic, accessible, and couple-friendly therapeutic spaces could encourage more individuals to seek the support they need, ultimately leading to healthier and more resilient relationships.

Limitation and Implication

This study would offer valuable insights into the dynamics of help-seeking behaviors among individuals experiencing high levels of conflict in romantic relationships. The findings suggest that various factors, such as societal stigma, accessibility of resources, and personal barriers, significantly influence whether and how individuals seek support. By identifying these barriers, the study can inform the development of targeted interventions designed to encourage help-seeking and support those in conflict-heavy relationships. Additionally, the results could contribute to broader efforts to reduce the stigma associated with seeking help in the context of relationship conflicts, ultimately fostering healthier, more resilient relationships.

Despite the valuable contributions of this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. The reliance on self-report measures introduces the potential for bias, as participants may underreport or misrepresent their experiences due to social desirability or memory recall issues. Additionally, the sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings, particularly if the participants do not adequately represent the diversity of the broader population.

These limitations suggest that the conclusions drawn from this research should be interpreted with caution, and further validation in larger, more diverse samples is warranted.

Future Directions

Future research should build on the findings of this study by addressing its limitations and exploring additional avenues of inquiry. Expanding the sample size and including a more diverse population would enhance the generalizability of the results. Longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how help-seeking behaviors evolve over time in the context of ongoing conflict. Moreover, future research could examine different types of conflicts beyond those measured by the Romantic Partner Conflict Scale, offering a more nuanced understanding of how specific conflict patterns influence help-seeking.

It is imperative to place greater emphasis on pre-marital counseling and couple-friendly therapeutic approaches. Additionally, further research is needed to explore the conflicts that couples in the early stages of their relationships encounter and to develop strategies to help them navigate these challenges

effectively. By addressing the unique dynamics and stressors faced by couples in the formative stages of their relationships, we can better equip them with the tools necessary to build strong, resilient partnerships and not only limit the study and research to marital partners only. This approach not only fosters healthier relationships but also contributes to the long-term well-being and stability of individuals and families. Finally, exploring the role of digital platforms and community-based support systems could shed light on emerging trends in how individuals navigate and seek assistance for relationship conflicts in the modern era.

Conclusion

The study aimed to examine the relationship between conflict in romantic relationships, as measured by the Relationship Patterns Conflict Scale (RPCS), and help-seeking behaviors, as assessed by the General Help-Seeking Questionnaire (GHSQ). Despite the hypothesis predicting a strong positive correlation between higher levels of relational conflict and increased likelihood of seeking help, the results indicated only a weak positive correlation ($r(192) = 0.103$) that was not statistically significant ($p = 0.151$). These findings suggest that, contrary to expectations, conflict intensity in relationships does not have a substantial or direct influence on the likelihood of seeking help.

This outcome underscores the complexity of help-seeking behaviors. Several factors beyond conflict intensity, including personal attitudes toward seeking help, societal stigma, cultural norms, skepticism about the effectiveness of therapy, and financial constraints, appear to play a more significant role in shaping individuals' decisions to seek help. Additionally, the reluctance to seek help as a couple, particularly for unmarried partners, highlights the nuanced barriers that influence whether individuals pursue external support.

The findings suggest that interventions aimed at increasing help-seeking in the context of relational conflict should consider addressing these broader barriers, such as reducing stigma, improving access to affordable therapy, and enhancing trust in professional help. Furthermore, cultural sensitivity in therapy services may be crucial for creating an environment where individuals feel comfortable seeking support. Given the weak correlation, it is clear that help-seeking behaviors are influenced by a wider range of psychological, social, and economic factors, not merely the presence of conflict.

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